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by Father Charles M. Mangan

"We adore Thee, O Christ, and we praise Thee, because by Thy holy Cross Thou hast redeemed the world."

The Church prays these words during Lent, especially during the "Via Crucis" (the Stations of the Cross). On today's Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross, the Church also ponders this stirring truth: the Son of God redeemed sinful humanity by way of simple wood.

There are all kinds of crosses. Some are made of stone, others of wood, metal or another substance.

A different kind of "cross" is a difficult condition or circumstance that is often unpleasant for the one involved.

The Cross of Jesus was a wooden cross under which He labored much as He wended His way along the "Via Dolorosa" and on which He died for us once He reached Calvary's hill. That blessed Cross represents the outright rejection the Messiah experienced at the hands of many of the powerful in His day as well as His free and generous surrender to His celestial Father that resulted in our long-awaited--and necessary--reconciliation with the Most Blessed Trinity.

Jesus conquered Satan and his minions--the fallen angels--with His glorious Cross. The Master's obedience to His Father in the Holy Spirit completely turned the tide against "the prince of darkness," who had willingly wrecked so much havoc in the universe through his own rebellion against the Creator and his seductive tempting of our first parents, Adam and Eve.

In 312, the Roman Emperor Constantine I the Great was in Trier, Germany where he had an unexpected vision of a cross that appeared in the sky with the haunting words, "In hoc signum vinces" ("In this sign you conquer"). The Emperor was buoyed by the apparition and encouraged his 20,000 troops for the upcoming bloody battle against Maxentius and his 100,000 men. Constantine's soldiers, the majority of whom were pagans, placed the sacred image of the cross on their shields. The two military forces clashed near the Milvian Bridge over the Tiber River. Maxentius succumbed in the Tiber on October 28, 312, while his fierce legions were soundly routed.

Emperor Constantine decreed in the 313 Edict of Milan that the worship of God performed by the Christians was from henceforth tolerated and that Christianity was the official religion of the Roman Empire. Furthermore, the victorious leader did not seek revenge against his enemies but instead treated them with justice.

Constantine, particularly when facing a huge obstacle, placed his trust in Christ and His triumphant Cross. The lesson is clear: Jesus won over evil. We embrace His Cross when we cheerfully accept the myriad and multiple agonies present in our lives, realizing that when humbly yielded to, these "crosses" help to usher us into the reign of God that has no end.

Our Catholic spirituality is based on the imitation of Christ. Our faith assures us that if we bear His Cross now, one day we will be rewarded in Paradise. Saint Paul wrote almost two thousand years ago: "For if we have been united with Him in a Death like His, we shall certainly be united to Him in a Resurrection like His." (Romans 6:5)

Such "Good News"--that Jesus conquered by His Cross and we are summoned to do likewise--converted Emperor Constantine I the Great. May the same be said of us.

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